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Theology in Literature

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Equipping The Saints: Teacher Training in the Church

Sara Covin Juengst

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998

141 pages, \$23.95 Softcover

How to prepare those who feel called to teach within the Christian church? This is a critical question and an on-going challenge facing practically all teaching ministries within the Christian church, especially mainline denominations.

Sara Covin Juengst, a Presbyterian ordained minister and a Christian educator, knowing only too well from personal experience that frequently the church asks people to fulfil a task without providing the appropriate training support, commits herself in this text to do something about that. In a creative and constructive manner, she offers a year-long process of teacher training – a process which she says: “I have tested in four congregations”. One congregation in South Carolina notes that fifty people are excited about being a part of the saints’ journey.

“The heart of the process is a nine-month teacher training course, offering segments in biblical background, basic beliefs, and teaching techniques. Each segment contains thirteen sessions (three months of weekly sessions) of interactive study (7). That means a one-year commitment, including study assignments between sessions.

The author is convinced that quality in teaching must be demanded and she sees this disciplined approach to teacher training as a helpful way of assuring such quality. “Teaching requires special gifts: knowledge, aptitude, patience, enthusiasm, eagerness to learn and grow. How does the church go about finding persons with such gifts and extending to them a call to each?...The best, most theological sound approach to identifying and recruiting leaders, especially those who will serve as teachers, is one that will equip the saints for the work of ministry before asking them to consider a call to a specific task” (22). “I am convinced,” says Juengst, “that a course such as this, taught by well-trained teachers using the best educational methods and offered on a regular basis, can provide an answer to the perennial problem of securing quality teachers for our church’s educational work. The program stresses call and commitment rather than desperation and duty” (7).

This is a well-researched, carefully-planned and engagingly-written text. Chapter 1 provides a biblical foundation for the program, and explores the nature of “traditioning” in passing on the faith from one generation to another. “Traditioning is done largely through the telling of family stories”(10). “Traditioning both *binds* and *reminds*” (9). Chapter 2 examines the importance of recapturing a “theology of vocation”. Chapter 3 presents thirteen lesson plans

for the segment on biblical foundations. Chapter 4 does so for faith foundations. Chapter 5, through thirteen sessions on methodologies, identifies and works with and critiques a variety of teaching techniques. Chapter 6 underscores the importance of apprenticeship, affirmation and support. Although reading this book is an involvement with interactive learning, the intention of the author is clearly to make this a group process workbook – inviting people who wish to strengthen themselves as potential teachers as well as those who desire to improve themselves in the teaching they are already doing. Within each segment, and for each session, Juengst identifies resources that may be found to be helpful. The text also includes a “Mutual Agreement of Service” and a “Service of Consecration of Teachers”.

Juengst is deeply committed to the importance of teacher training. At one level her commitment is shaped by the fact that frequently in the church persons are asked to do a job without either training for or support in that job. This is putting “the cart before the horse”. At another level, her commitment is informed by her exciting sense of the purpose for Christian education. Here are two samples: “Church educators have always debated among themselves about the primary purpose of Christian education. Some have emphasized instruction, others becoming part of the faith community, others spiritual development, and still others education for justice and social change. Recent years have seen the emergence of a new emphasis on Christian education as ‘traditioning’, passing on the meaning of the faith community from one generation to the next. This is a task of both the home and the church” (82). “The purpose of Christian education is not to fill people’s heads with biblical trivia. It is to tell the family story, that story we find in scripture, with such imagination and verve that lives are illuminated and changed” (82). To fulfil these purposes calls for a firm commitment to both the importance of and the need for intensive teacher training!

Richard Osmer, professor of Christian education at Princeton Theological Seminary, in his book *A Teachable Spirit* says: “Mainline Protestantism is at a crossroads. The path it chooses to travel today will be of great consequence well into the next century.” Both Osmer and Juengst hope that we will see not only the challenges for qualitative and effective teacher training, but also the needs and the opportunities as well as the necessity to respond with a plan of action. In my view, Juengst puts forth a commendable program and session plans in *Equipping The Saints*!

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